



Beech trees fuel soil animal food webs via root-derived nitrogen

Sarah L. Zieger^{a,*}, Andrea Holczinger^a, Janine Sommer^b, Michaela Rath^c,
Yakov Kuzyakov^{b,d}, Andrea Polle^c, Mark Maraun^a, Stefan Scheu^{a,e}

^aUniversity of Göttingen, J.F. Blumenbach Institute of Zoology and Anthropology, Animal Ecology, Untere Karspüle 2, 37073 Göttingen, Germany

^bUniversity of Göttingen, Buisen Institute, Soil Science of Temperate Ecosystems, Buisenweg 2, 37077 Göttingen, Germany

^cUniversity of Göttingen, Buisen Institute, Forest Botany and Tree Physiology, Buisenweg 2, 37077 Göttingen, Germany

^dKazan Federal University, Institute of Environmental Sciences, Kremlyovskaya St. 18, 420008 Kazan, Russia

^eUniversity of Göttingen, Centre of Biodiversity and Sustainable Land Use, Von-Siebold-Str. 8, 37075 Göttingen, Germany

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Abstract

Root-derived resources are receiving increased attention as basal resources for soil animal food webs. They predominantly function as carbon and energy resources for microbial metabolism in the rhizosphere, however, root-derived nitrogen may also be important. We explored both the role of root-derived carbon (C) and nitrogen (N) for the nutrition of soil animal species. Using ¹³C and ¹⁵N pulse labeling we followed in situ the flux of shoot-derived C and N into the soil animal food web of young beech (*Fagus sylvatica*) and ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*) trees. For labeling with ¹³C, trees were exposed to increased atmospheric concentrations of ¹³CO₂ and for labeling with ¹⁵N leaves were immersed in a solution of Ca¹⁵NO₃. Twenty days after labeling root-derived N was detected in each of the studied soil animal species whereas incorporation of root-derived C was only detected in the ash rhizosphere. More root-derived N was incorporated into soil animals from the beech as compared to the ash rhizosphere, in spite of the higher ¹⁵N signatures in fine roots of ash as compared to beech. The results suggest that soil animal food webs not only rely on root C but also on root N with the contribution of root N to soil animal nutrition varying with tree species. This novel pathway of plant N highlights the importance of root-derived resources for soil animal food webs.

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Introduction

The close interrelationship between the decomposer system and plants is mediated by leaf litter input and rhizodeposition (Wardle 2002). As up to 90% of net primary plant

*Corresponding author. Fax: +49 551 39 25448.
E-mail address: szieger@gwdg.de (S.L. Zieger).